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Body, Flesh, Skin, Canvas:

Black/Queer/Women and Tattoos as Diasporic Art, Reclamation, and Performance

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Body, Flesh, Skin, Canvas:

Black/Queer/Women and Tattoos as Diasporic Art, Reclamation, and Performance

by

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Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at Austin
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of the Requirements
for the Degree of

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Dedication

For my great-grandmother, Gwendolyn Christian;

My grandmother, Valerie Smith;

My father, Cesare “Chez” Kitt.

Thank you for guiding me back to myself. I will continue to write in your memory.

And for those of us who see our bodies as canvases and temples made to be adorned, I honor our commitment to self, family, community, spirit.

Acknowledgements

I want to acknowledge the immense amount of patience and encouragement I received from my advisor Dr. Cherise Smith. I'm not sure that I would have been able to reckon with the challenges faced in graduate school without the unrelenting support and reminders that this work is important. I'd also like to acknowledge Dr. Lyndon K. Gill for the humbling generosity and kindness shared with me. I am eager to see this work take shape with your guidance. I am thankful for the community of scholars who guide graduate student with mindfulness while producing critical scholarship in the African and African Diaspora Studies program.

To my mother Ebony, thank you for keeping me grounded and always picking up my calls. Those conversations often saved me in times. To my little brothers KK and Camren, you give me drive and purpose. I owe much of my curiosity to my grandmother Gail, whose ability to captivate a room with tales of unorthodox truths kept my skepticism healthy. To my aunt Charisse, thank you for always treating me like your own. To Migdalia and Paul, I am indebted to you both for opening your home and your hearts to me. Amaris, thank you for never ceasing to amaze me with her knowledge and bravery.

To my comrades, my homies, thank you for holding me down, keeping me focused, and for reminding me how not lose myself to the academy.

Abstract

Body, Flesh, Skin Canvas:
Black/Queer/Women and Tattoos as Diasporic Art, Reclamation, and Performance

Chantaneice Montaya Kitt, M.A.
The University of Texas at Austin, 2017

Supervisor: Cherise Smith

Body, Flesh, Skin Canvas: Black/Queer/Women and Tattoos as Diasporic Art, Reclamation, and Performance concerns black/queer/ women's participation in tattoo culture in the United States. Considering the relationship between Tattoo, Diaspora, Gender and Sexuality, and Performance studies, *Body, Flesh and Skin Canvas* works to reveal the critical possibilities that emerge from centering the narratives of black/queer/women who participate in tattoo practices. Through the study of the first noted black tattoo artist Jacci Gresham, artist-activist-scholar Karmenife, and my own autoethnographic accounts, I intend to explore the various ways tattoo culture has been used as a method towards, and expression of reclamation, self-possession, and self-fashioning for a group that has historically been relegated to the margins of a heteropatriachial, white supremacist society. Using black feminist theory, visual analysis, and performance studies methods, I interrogate the ways black/queer/women are signifying on the practice of tattooing through fleshly concepts of diaspora. Ultimately, this paper shows how black/queer/women's participation in tattoo culture generates a potent discussion on how one can utilize the body, skin, and flesh as an artistic surface and canvas, that has the power to express, heal, and reaffirm individual and communal identity.

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Introduction

Body, Flesh, Skin Canvas: Black/Queer/Women and Tattoos as Diasporic Art, Reclamation, and Performance concerns black/queer/ women's participation in tattoo culture in the United States. Considering the relationship between Tattoo, Diaspora, Gender and Sexuality, and Performance studies, *Body, Flesh and Skin Canvas* works to reveal the critical possibilities that emerge from centering the narratives of black/queer/women who participate in tattoo practices. Through the study of the first noted black tattoo artist Jacci Gresham, artist-activist-scholar Karmenife, and my own autoethnographic accounts, I explore the various ways tattoo culture has been used as a method towards, and expression of reclamation, self-possession, and self-fashioning for a group that has historically been relegated to the margins of a heteropatriachial, white supremacist society. Using black feminist theory, visual analysis, and performance studies methods, I interrogate the ways black/queer/women are signifying on the practice of tattooing through fleshly concepts of diaspora. Ultimately, this paper shows how black/queer/women's participation in tattoo culture generates a potent discussion on how one can utilize the body, skin, and flesh as an artistic surface and canvas, that has the power to express, heal, and reaffirm individual and communal identity.

In his critical essay "Black/Queer/Diaspora At the Current Conjuncture" (2012), Jafari Allen argues that queer space must be considered in the language we use, the terms we assign, and the punctuation at play. He offers "Black/Queer/Diaspora" as an intervention on the terms black, queer, and diaspora. He argues, "the recognition of black/queer/diaspora is at once a caution, a theory, and (most certainly) a work" (214). It

is from Allen's rethinking of the terms held together and spread apart that I interrogate the work they do in my own research studying the lives of black/queer/women.

Researcher Positionality

I'd like to take this opportunity to be real and say this has been the most difficult year I've had in graduate school thus far. I'd be lying if I didn't admit to searching for other career options on multiple occasions. Turns out culinary school is wildly expensive and my rapping skills are frankly…let's just say, emerging. I have considered some sort of craigslist surfing job where I get people to pay me to find their most desired recycled furniture, but HGTV hasn't responded to that e-mail yet. I'm stuck here, in a space and moment akin only to what I've read in science fiction stories of distorted realities; and I'm the extraterrestrial.

This alienation is the result of a compounding experience of being a 26-year-old black queer woman who is a first-generation poverty graduate now attempting graduate school while living in a rapidly gentrifying Austin amongst record black population control/containment. Since moving to what is not the whitest space I've ever lived (surely that titles goes to Guilford, CT), but the furthest from home, I've found myself losing myself in place. In what feels like a paralytic crisis of belonging and identity, I've been waiting to feel the wind of the pendulum coming back my way, searching for moments where I could finally begin surfing the groundswell I seemed to be engulfed by.

It turns out what I needed was an escape route back to myself. I needed to reacquaint myself with the old solace of writing in the eerie hours of the morning-night, eager to tell complex truths in plain language. I needed to uncover the zeal that propelled

me to believe it was imperative that I discard the statement of purpose on cold war politics and school desegregation to instead propose a study on tattoos a month shy of due dates. My only background in the topic came from the memories of seeing tattoos materialize on the flesh of Harlem residents in the 90s and new millennium, and now the images I found myself adorned with over the years. I wanted to locate the wind that propels me, and other black queer women like me, to permanently alter the flesh. My hope is that this presentation serves as a way for me to remember, echoing 2-Chainz on "Birthday Song", what I do and who I do it for. My hope is that the pendulum is swinging back my way as I use the platform set before me by my black feminist elders, who repeat loudly to me that the personal is indeed political.

Chez

Honoring the life of a loved one through tattooing was a common practice where I'm from in Harlem. I was immersed in a community whose culture shifted as folks began collecting assorted images across their arms, legs, necks, feet, and faces. I can still recall rubbing my fingertips across the backhand of my uncle Clyde's freshly done tattoo. I was overcome to see my father's name, beautifully scripted in black ink and scrolling across his backhand. It was an effort to exclaim that my father, and I--his only child--would not be forgotten.

I attempted on multiple occasions to convince my mother to find an artist who would tattoo a minor. Though it is against New York State law to tattoo anyone under 18, regardless of parental consent, there were many ways around this in East Harlem. I could pay a visit to the nail salon/cellphone/DVD shop on 125th and Park that advertised $20

tattoos and piercings, or I could the tattoo artists who learned to tattoo while in prison and were now tattooing from their apartments in our neighborhood. Though my mom did agree to give me permission should I find an artist willing to do it, I decided that I would wait to be sure I settled on the design and placement. As I ruminated in the seven years proceeding his death, my unwavering desire to be tattooed was reaffirmed by the growing fascination with tattoos in mainstream popular culture. My exposure, and thus my desire, only increased as tattoo culture gained acceptance. In preparation for my high school graduation in 2009, I tattooed my father's nickname, Chez, on the inside of my right bicep as a permanent memorial to him after his murder seven years prior. It was my first tattoo; four letters, written in Edwardian Script ITC, printed from Microsoft Word, and poorly executed[1] by a white guy named Caleb in Cromwell, CT. After an unusually long and heavy scabbing process, I was left with a slightly raised and damaged tattoo that I adored, if only for its significance and not for the shabby craftsmanship, what I know now to be a general lack of dexterity in tattooing skin with melanin. Today, partnered with black artists who, by default and necessity, have developed methods for tattooing a wide range of complexions, my wrist to shoulder sleeves are my only journals. Each piece marking an explicit yet nuanced view of where I've been, where I am, and where I might be going. They protect me and visually remind me of their affirming messages when I least expect it.

[1] Though his portfolio showcased an artist adept at photorealism and new school styles, with crisp lines and smooth shading, Caleb insisted that the four letters would require a heavier hand to make sure the black ink really settled in the lightest part of my black body.

I Wish I Could Show You…

On my left arm, beginning at the ball of the shoulder and stretching downward, and ending about an inch away from the bend of my elbow, I have a tattoo inspired by the poetry of Persian poet Hafez/Hafiz of Shiraz. Through a chance encounter with the 14th century poet's work by way of the 21st century platform that is Facebook, a serendipitous moment was forever etched into my skin. The English translation of his Farsi verse spoke loudly to my 21-year-old self, "I wish that I could show you. When you're lonely and in the darkness, the astonishing light of your own being." I knew then that tattoo would never lose significance. I trusted that the permanent installation would serve to revive me in challenging times, a permanent reminder that would remain constant in its purpose, even as the darkness took different shapes.

Having worked with artist Richard Parker, aka MadeRich (written here as Rich) of the Queens tattoo shop Think Before You Ink for over two years at that point, I trusted that he would be able to illustrate the essence of Hafez's timeless words. While there are many ways to go about choosing a tattoo, I choose to work with artists who can articulate my desires through their own lens. Tattoo artists, the ones I know at least, are hard to excite. Working at the intersection of a rapidly growing industry where customer satisfaction is profoundly central to a successful tattoo experience and thus the business, artists often encounter clients who are eager to control the tattoos image. So when I text Rich Hafez's quote and tell him to run free with his artistry, I know I am getting his most creative and honest artistry.

For this piece, Rich decided to fashion a neo-traditional style punctured with overt and subliminal imagery of a blind folded woman, facing outward and up towards unknown space. As tears stream down her face, unable to be contained by the cloth gently wrapped around her eyes, her facial expression reveals longing, and/or relief. The neo-traditional style is marked by the melding of "American traditional" design features, such as the solid black and bold outline and popular imagery of a woman's head and roses. It is characterized by precise but experimental shading and blending. Riffing off the traditional imagery of swallow birds, used historically by sailors to honor and recognize extensive sailing experience, the blindfolded woman is framed by the contorting bodies of a dove above and a crow below, a symbolic pairing (representing peaceful beginnings and potential loss respectively) that serves to oppose a single connotation of the rolling tears. I often wonder, is she crying because darkness consumes her or because she's finally found the light of her own being? As you might expect, the answer changes with the tide and is not as important as the meaning derived from the multi-valent dialectic it represents on my brown skin in my black life.

Black Feminist Praxis

In following the legacy of black feminist scholars and critical ethnographers such as Soyin Madison, Cathy Cohen, Beth E. Richie, Mirelle Miller-Young, and L.H. Stallings, I believe it is a necessary methodological choice to accept their credence and use my intersectional identity as a constructive and inextricable frame from which I can navigate my analysis. By beginning with my reflections, I address my own positionality

candidly in order to be held accountable as a researcher and transparent about where my research questions first took form and still find root. Personal biography transforms the silences in the archives and is an essential accompaniment to radical scholarship. Though subjectivity is still seen as a hindrance to academic scholarship, my methodological approach is grounded in opposing violent Eurocentric methods for research and to acknowledge feminist assertions that the personal is political. The process of altering my own body through tattoos has been driven by a desire to transform the skin I was conditioned to believe was shameful, into a canvas decorated with permanent images and words that preserve my creative expression of selfhood. Put plainly, the choice to adorn my skin with potent and palpable affirmations of self within a society resolved to control, contain, and command the bodies of poor, black/queer/women and non-gender conforming folks is a radical act.

I am in search for the voices of other black/queer/women who have chosen to permanently adorn their bodies. Taking seriously Sandra Harding's call to value the narratives and knowledges that are generated from centering marginalized communities, my main interlocutors' insistence on speaking for themselves through tattoos, drives my efforts to examine how black/queer/women employ their bodies, flesh, and skin as canvases in order to permanently mark and declare their personal politics, affirm healing, and demand self-possession through a diasporic performance of the flesh.

Foremothers: Jacci and Val

"This white girl said, while I was standing at my door she said, 'Nigga get out the way,' and I said, 'Well let me tell you, you don't have to be in *this nigga's* shop, get the fuck

out!"[2] After being asked to share her experience with racism in the tattoo industry, Jacci Gresham retells this story in the raw interview footage from the 2012 documentary film "Color Outside the Lines", with a mixture of glee, seriousness, and satisfaction. Now in her mid 70s, Gresham has owned her shop, Aart Accent, since its opening in 1976. Co-owned with her tattoo teacher and boyfriend Ali Sing until his death, Aart Accent is recognized as the longest operating tattoo shop in the U.S. south.[3] Gresham has been tattooing for "38 or 40" years and remains one of the most important figures in the black tattoo community. In the 1970s and 80s, black representations in tattoo culture were rare. Gresham's stories of confronting racism and sexism were spreading to aspiring black artists who struggled to find acceptance in the industry.

Most of the information I have on Gresham stem from her participation in "Color Outside the Lines," a film by tattoo artist Miya Bailey and director Artemus Jenkins that looked to explore the exclusion of black artists within the tattoo industry. Bailey, who hails from Asheville, North Carolina and now owns two shops in Atlanta, GA, has been tattooing for over a decade.[4] The film is Bailey's attempt to address and "debunk common stigmas he believes are attached to black tattoo artists and their side of the culture; ranging from a lack of creativity to overall poor quality of work."[5] Bailey's film stands as a groundbreaking documentary: it is the first to provide an in-depth interview with Gresham, in addition to other black tattooists from across the United States who remark on Gresham's influence. Those with fifteen or more years of experience, such as

[2] *Color Outside The Lines, Uncut.* Dir. Artemus Jenkins. Prod. Miya Bailey. Youtube. N.p., 2013. Web.
[3] IBID
[4] IBID
[5] *Color Outside The Lines, Uncut*. Dir. Artemus Jenkins. Prod. Miya Bailey. Youtube. N.p., 2013. Web.

Zulu, Damon Conklin, Craig Foster, Dueler, Derrick Varley, and Tyrone "Red" Cooley, all black men, are featured in the first three minutes of the film commenting on the many challenges they faced lacking access to training and mentorship because of anti-blackness. Seeking out apprenticeships often resulted in humiliating laughter at the audacity that black folks were attempting to tattoo. Despite this, black artists like Zulu and Deuler found inspiration when they heard tales from New Orleans of Gresham. Dueler, a tattoo artist from Watts, California but currently practicing in Atlanta, stated that "The first thing [he] learned about tattooing was from reading stories about Jacci."[6] The first internationally recognized black tattoo artist, Zulu spoke about the humiliating laughter that he was struck with when seeking out apprenticeships from Southern California tattoo shops and recalled feeling camaraderie with Gresham from afar.

Despite Gresham's and Aart Accents significance to American tattoo culture, they do not show up in the scholarship written about American tattoo culture.[7] More surprising, Margot Mifflin's *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo* (1997, 2001) devotes only a short paragraph to Gresham even though she is arguably at the text's center which examines a one hundred and fifty years of Western tattoo culture. Mifflin argues tattoos have become "touchstones for women's changing roles and evolving concerns during the most progressive era in women's history" (8). By tracing the aesthetic and politicized choice to tattoo the female body, Mifflin focuses her deepest attention on white women's transgressions through the culture, stating that black

[6] Color Outside The Lines. Dir. Artemus Jenkins. Prod. Miya Bailey. Youtube. N.p., 2013. Web.
[7] IBID

women have yet to pick up the tattoo machine (120). Despite there being a small population of black women tattoo artists, I find it emblematic of white feminist practices that Gresham's narrative is not treated with same reverence as the other (white) women who are featured. After reciting to Bailey the story of her "cussing out" the racist white woman, Gresham comments that at the time it was always the white women, as opposed to white men, who conveyed their racist attitudes outright. Gresham's story and dynamic role in the tattoo industry deserves closer consideration as she maneuvers the critical intersection between race and gender. The implications of examining closely Gresham's career and personal stories can only be accurately parsed out through black feminist theories and methods.

In her interview, Gresham articulates the potential for tattoo culture to serve as a site of resistance for black folks, specifically black women. Originally trained as a traditional artists and architect, Gresham was unable to find work in Detroit as an architect so she and her partner, Ali Singh decided to move to New Orleans open the city's second shop. The sexual and political culture of the shop was heavily directed by Singh. He insisted that he would not tattoo women's bodies, arguing that it was socially unacceptable. Gresham detested and determined that Ali's would serve the shop a silent owner. Both the story of Gresham's boldness in defying the racist vitriol spat at her from the bigoted white woman and Singh's chauvinist rule, place Gresham squarely in a long black feminist tradition, as Cheryl Glick declares, "Of black women's assertiveness and their use of every expression of racism to launch multiple assaults against the entire fabric of inequality." Today, women account for seventy percent of Gresham's clientele

and though there is currently no statistical data on the racial make-up, Gresham's pioneering tattoo style gives us some insight into her impact on black tattoo culture.[8]

Black Skin as Canvas

Gresham is recognized as having introduced "Afrocentric" aesthetics to her black clients and the tattooing world in the early 1990s.[9] She tells Bailey that: Tattooing is a black art form. We lost it and now we are bringing it back…I don't like when people come in here wanting to get Japanese writing. Most of the time, they don't even know what it says. I don't know what it says. I can't relate to that.[10] For Gresham, it was deeply troubling to witness black folks come to her with ideas that honored the symbols, images, and languages of European and Asian societies. Believing that black peoples tattoos should be representative of their histories, bodies, and styles, Gresham began to incorporate black cultural features to the popular trends of the time; Betty Boop's with brown skin and Nike sneakers, women with full lips and wider noses, and dreadlocks in place of manes on lions.[11]

Gresham's content is complimented by her bold, shade heavy style, a technical choice she suggests is best for delivering legible tattoos on various shades of brown skin. She tells Bailey that for her, "working on black people is more difficult" because an individual black person may have varying shades depending on the area of their bodies. She asserts that seeing the skin in-person is a vital step in allowing the skin to

[8] Mifflin, Margot. *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo*. New York: PowerHouse, 2013. Print.
[9] IBID
[10] *Color Outside The Lines, Uncut*. Dir. Artemus Jenkins. Prod. Miya Bailey. Youtube. N.p., 2013. Web.
[11] IBID

communicate with the artist what they "need to do with the skin. Not what they want."[12] Flash, the common designs usually drawn on paper and displayed on the walls or in binders in some tattoo shops, typically contain images bursting with bright and bold colors that are not suitable for black folks' skin. Gresham recommends that black tattoo artists exhibit their flash designs on brown paper, instead of white paper, to better represent how color will show up on black and brown skin. Intriguingly, Gresham believes that water color on brown paper bags serves as the best representation for comprehending how brown skin will absorb the ink.

Gresham's tattoo theory is shared by many tattoo artists who, from experimenting with tattoos on their own skin for practice, learned the techniques necessary for optimizing the tattoos image. Gresham's insights reflect that of Val Dale, the woman Jacci met at a Reno tattoo convention—the woman Gresham proclaims is the *actual* first black tattoo artist. Three minutes into Gresham's interview, I am floored by the reality that, regardless of who came first, two black women played integral parts in the burgeoning culture of tattoos. Gresham mentioned that Dale was in a *Jet* magazine issue from the 1970s, but Bailey does no inquiring further about the elusive artist. I was delighted to find Dale and her husband, also her tattoo teacher, in a two-page spread in the lifestyle section of the August 5, 1976 issue of *Jet Magazine's.* The article, entitled "Interracial Ariz. Couple Tattoos Way to Success" by Donald Adderton, is a rich record that deserves further analysis into the political and cultural moment readers of Jet Magazine would have read it. For now, Dale's comments on the state of tattooing

[12] Adderton, Donald. "Interracial Ariz. Couple Tattoos Way to Success." Jet 5 Aug. 1976: n. pag. Google Scholar. Web.

amongst black people and black skin gives further credence to Gresham's philosophy of tattooing black skin, "I see a lot of Blacks with tattoos. Most of them have been homemade things… Most tattoo artists usually don't know what to say when a Black person comes in…Black skin in a lot of ways is a lot more sensitive. It's a lot easier to cut, which I had to learn the hard way."[13]

Unlike a to-do list written on the back of a hand, tattoos don't sit on top of the skin. The tattoo ink is inserted all the way into the dermis, the middle layer of skin, which is why tattoos are permanent and require laser treatments to be removed, and why getting a tattoo or removing one hurts. There's always a layer of skin on top of the [ink], which acts like a translucent layer on top of whatever color you put underneath the skin," said Mario Barth, the Austrian-born, award-winning tattoo artist who's been applying tattoos for four decades and boasts Lenny Kravitz and other celebrity clients.

Melanin is the variant presence of pigment in the skin that makes us black people shades of brown. It is produced in the translucent layer also known as the epidermis. Tattoo ink is injected below the layer of melanin, so the color of someone's skin sits above the tattoo ink but below the outer surface of the skin. With that in mind, it's important to note individual skin tones and undertones will also vary so an artist should learn to analyze skillfully the undertone of each person to deliver clear, legible images. Many artists, like the one who tattooed my father's name, do not care to learn how to apply tattoos to brown skin, opting instead to produce the muddied and scarred images now popularized by numerous black athletes like Allen Iverson and Dennis Rodman, as

[13] Adderton, Donald. "Interracial Ariz. Couple Tattoos Way to Success." Jet 5 Aug. 1976: n. pag. Google Scholar. Web

well as rappers like Lil Wayne and Wiz Khalifa. Gresham's technical theory is powerful, especially given the popular notion that brown skin is a hindrance to good tattoo work.

Black Skin as Kryptonite

As Bailey's film opens with its initial production credits, legendary tattoo artist Zulu queries on the irony that he is struck with as the film centers blackness within tattoo culture. "I actually find sit strange that during our current day people are surprised when they see black people tattooing or getting tattooed. They think it's quite new in our culture but in fact it is one of the most ancient parts of what we've always done."[14] When Zulu laments that tattooing and other bodily adornment practices (like scarification and piercings) are "in fact…one of the most ancient parts of what we've always done," he suggests that the strangeness stems from wide-spread beliefs that black people, whether artist or canvas, have no place within the tattoo community. This is in part because black folks and their ancestors have been erased from the historical narrative. Echoing Zulu's bewilderment, I find it curious that there has yet to be, other than Bailey's film, a serious examination of the historical and contemporary relations between tattoo culture and black communities in the United States. My project intervenes in that tradition.

Though the film shortens Zulu's full statement to just the first two sentences, the "unseen" footage reveals Zulu's extended rumination leaving Bailey and his director Artemus Jenkins at a loss for words. It's worth quoting at length:

> Black people have always marked their bodies to associate themselves with their tribes and their gods also marked where they stood in their tribes, their positions. These markings had to do with life, death, rites of passage. It's who we are. It's always been who we are and these new black tattooers are reaching into the past

[14] *Color Outside The Lines, Uncut*. Dir. Artemus Jenkins. Prod. Miya Bailey. Youtube. N.p., 2013. Web.

> and bringing this into our current future…I have no problem with stating that many other cultures have learned from what we've done in our culture and unfortunately so many times it has been stolen from us and acquired and been represented in other cultures as theirs when in fact it came out of the roots of who we were. Black people have always adorned themselves with clothing and spiritual marks…so this isn't something new. This tattoo that you see happening now in our time is only a reflection of who we've always from early man and from the earliest of times.[15]

Zulu's declaration invokes a host of generative concepts that not only makes space for me to consider the significance of black tattoo culture, but demands that the practice be read alongside discourses within art history, anthropology, cultural studies, African diaspora studies, memory and trauma studies, and tattoo studies to confront these erasures.

The history of tattoo in American culture reflect the same anti-black forces that permeate every level of society. What we read from the skin, of the wearer, is different based primarily on the color of the pigmentation of the skin. White people have somehow claimed and appropriated tattoo culture and now see themselves as the rightful proprietors of the practice. White people are represented as rock stars, defiant, and artistic when inked.[16] Black people's tattooed bodies come to represent criminals, savages, and "ghetto" when inked.[17] White women who are tattooed are sexually liberated and rebellious for having gone against Victorian ideals of purity, while Black women are ratchet, hood, and open access. Black people are also outright heedless for participating

[15] *Color Outside The Lines.* Dir. Artemus Jenkins. Prod. Miya Bailey. Youtube. N.p., 2013. Web.
[16] *Color Outside The Lines.* Dir. Artemus Jenkins. Prod. Miya Bailey. Youtube. N.p., 2013. Web.
[17] IBID

in tattoo practices because it is simply not made for their skin. It is a popular notion that you cannot see tattoos on black people, thus their participation marks their backwardness.

During the Season 2 finale of the tattoo competition show, ,"Ink Master," 2.4 million viewers watched closely as the remaining 4 artists/contestants competed for their last opportunity to earn the $100,000 prize and title of "Ink Master." The final task was to tattoo four elite athletes, two of which were "darker skinned" African American males. Steve Tefft, with 17 years of experience and the clear front-runner throughout the entire season, was shown during the segment saying to one of those men that he "should obviously go with [tattooing] the lighter areas" on his body for the tattoo to be worthwhile. The show then cut to Tefft's confessional interview, typical of reality TV genre, and said to the camera "I don't want the dark canvases. They take away half your skill set."[18] Tefft. the almost twenty-year veteran, fine arts major, and owner of a shop in Groton, CT, would go on to be crowned "Ink Master" that evening despite audiences witnessing him position melanin as a kind of kryptonite.[19] Though he believed that 17 years of skill building could be stolen by the dark skin of his human canvas, Tefft's statement went without debate.

The contestants on the show continuously indicate their disdain when approaching skin color. Take for example the third episode of the sixth season, in which contestants were asked to create a tattoo inspired by stained glass. While most of the artists used a panoply of colors in their creations, one of the competitors opted to only use black and

[18] "Ink Master." Spike.com. N.p., n.d. Web..
[19] IBID

grey. “Bright colors just don’t stand out on dark skin,” the contestant explained, justifying why his caramel-skinned client’s tattoo was not as vibrant as every other tattoo. Or take the episode all the way back in season one, when a contestant noted, “My ideal canvas would be, like, paper-white skin.” For the artists competing for a large cash prize, tattooing dark skin is apparently a strategic disadvantage. Competitors explain that tattoos don’t show up as well on dark skin, and therefore, they cannot showcase their talents. Competitors often sabotage each other by handing off dark-skinned “canvases.”. The weekly reality series, hosted by former Jane’s Addiction guitarist Dave Navarro, is also chockfull of casual sexism, from calling women “girls” to emphasizing the need to “grow a pair of balls.” While Ink Master is certainly not a beacon of progressiveness, it has gained a devoted audience, consistently watched by over 2 million people and returning for a 10th season this year despite circulating racist and sexist ideologies within tattoo culture.

Controlling Images, Twilight Bodies

Gresham compelled many of her clients to learn more about their history so that their tattoos might serve a greater purpose for them, often showcasing her own work as an example. One of her favorite tattoos is one representing herself and her grandmother, depicted in a kitchen setting where a “Mammy” figure pulls a chicken from the oven and the young “Picanny” girl looks on, jumping in exuberance, looking mid-air in awe at the magic the black woman figure has cooked. While racist archetypes of black women and girls, might seem like an odd choice to permanently inscribe on her skin, Gresham instead takes, what Patricia Hill Collins calls a “controlling image” and re-inscribes her

own meaning through the reclamation of her body as a canvas.[20] I argue the tropes are able to escape the centuries old trauma associated with their historical representations through Gresham's flesh.

In *Caribbean Spaces: Escape from Twilight Zones (2013),* Carol Boyce Davies theorizes twilight zones as useful for revealing the power of transforming the skin. Twilight zones, as Davies states "are spaces of transformation from one condition to another, one location to another, one reality to another, and the sometimes newly created emotional, physical, and conceptual space that then becomes another identified location. Twilight zones can therefore be scary spaces of loss but also of gain" where mythic possibilities exist (11). For Davies, twilight zones are places that construct routes of escape for the most marginalized. If we are to make flesh from Davies' theorization of twilight zones, I am compelled to suggest that when tattoos are applied to the dermis layer of black/queer/ gender non-conforming folks, we literally, theoretically, and methodologically inscribe the flesh with mythic possibility. Thus we become twilight bodies, body spaces that can transcend time, culture, and place. My next interlocutor, Karmenife exemplifies further how tattoos can engender powerful, transformative, escapes by way of the skin. Before that however, it is worth examining how modern day tattoo practices be read as harkening to West African philosophies that undergirded bodily ornamentation.

[20] Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print.

Tattoos as Diasporic Practice

It is not a difficult task to understand tattooing as a diasporic practice since it has transpired across time, place, and culture. Carmen, Guitar, and Dillon state in their study of the evolutionary motivations behind tattoos and piercings in popular culture that "after individuals began painting symbols on the walls of caves… it was not long before the projections of human thought turned to our own bodies, resulting in the use of our skin as canvas." All across the non-colonized world, tattoos and scarification were employed to express cultural beliefs surrounding spirituality and healing, gender, beauty, rites of passage, and community affiliation. According to anthropologist Lars Krutak, a research associate in the Department of Anthropology at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, in terms of tattoos on actual bodies, the earliest known example is located on the "Iceman", a 5,200-year-old frozen mummy found on the Italian-Austrian border in 1991.[21] The distribution of the 15 tattooed dots and small crosses on his lower spine, right knee, and ankle joints correspond to areas of strain-induced degeneration, with the suggestion that they may have been applied to alleviate joint pain and were therefore essentially therapeutic.[22] Though there is a rich history of tattooing in societies across the world, my focus will be on traditional body adornment from tribes based in African countries given the forced enslavement of black bodies as chattel.

Prior to the discovery of "Iceman", the earliest examples were for a long time

[21] Scallon, Marilyn. "Tattoos: Telling Stories in the Flesh. Q&A with Lars Krutak." Smithsonian Insider. N.p., 25 Aug. 2015. Web.
[22] IBID

located on several female Egyptian mummies that dated to c. 2000 B.C.[23] There's certainly evidence that women had tattoos on their bodies and limbs from figurines c. 4000-3500 B.C. to occasional female figures represented in tomb scenes c. 1200 B.C. and in figurine form c. 1300 B.C., all with tattoos on their thighs.[24] In their large photo documentation of skin art in Africa, photographers Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher captured remarkable visual evidence of the The Wodaabe nomads of Niger, who practice this delicate form of body art for both beauty and protection. Rather than injecting ink under the skin with a needle as done tattoo parlors around the world, the Wodaabe use a razor blade to make small surface incisions into which they rub charcoal… Believing that evil forces may enter the body through a person's orifices, Wodaabe women protect their children by deliberately placing tattoos close to the mouth and eyes. A mother starts tattooing her children in the first year of its life, creating delicate fan-shaped design at the corner of the lips and three or four vertical lines on the cheeks.

Anthropologist Wade Davis speaks to these sentiments in the foreword to Chris Rainer's 2004 publication, Ancient Marks: The Sacred Art of Tattooing and Body Marking, that "The skin is the boundary that separates the self from the external world. It is the interface between the inner and the outer, the intimate and the infinite… To be painted was to display and honor a connection to something greater than self, a communal knowledge, never spoken about but never forgotten…To endure the excruciating ordeal inherent in the decorative techniques was not only to pass in initiation

[23] Rubin, Arnold. *Marks of Civilization: Artistic Transformations of the Human Body*. Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, U of California, Los Angeles, 1988. Print.
[24] IBID

from innocence to experience, from childhood to maturity, it was to establish an explicit connection between the individual and the realm of the spirits. To be tattooed or decoratively scarred was to be human, and to be human was to know the gods."

It should come as no surprise that when white European invaders encountered these practices, they were both fascinated and appalled by what they considered "uncivilized" and "primitive" acts. Greeks and Romans, considered tattoos to be a sign of disgrace. One origin of the word ìtattooî is the Latin term for stigma, an indelible mark cut into the flesh of a slave or criminal to brand his or her status forever. According to Martin van Dinter, though a means for identifying friend of foe amongst African tribes, among the Kru, in the coastal areas of Liberia and Sierra Leone, some men still have a characteristic facial tattoo dating to the slave trade: a vertical line in the middle of the forehead representing the ship's mast. The Europeans promised to leave the Kru in peace in exchange for safe passage through their territory".[25] Tattoos and body modification, like branding, coalesce at this site as black human beings are commodified and deemed property; this is the process by which black bodily modification becomes implicit in the creation an abjective blackness. Not only were these traditions, as a form of expression, viciously and systematically prohibited by colonizers and Christian missionaries, but the importance of bodily manipulation as a spiritual and cultural transformation, which was also grounded in liberating epistemologies, was ruptured by the forced flesh manipulation of enslaved laborers.

[25] Dinter, Maarten Hesselt Van. The World of Tattoo: An Illustrated History. Amsterdam: Kit, 2005. Print.

Branding as Surveillance Technology

In her recently published book, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, Simone Browne examines how "the intimate relation between branding and the black body—our biometric past—can allow us to think critically about our "biomentric present." Though Dr. Browne's overall intentions are to establish branding as a biometric technology—that is to say the branding of black bodies can be seen as a predecessor to contemporary surveillance technologies such as fingerprinting and facial recognition—she also suggests, through historical case studies, that branding played a role in "the making of the racial subject as commodity" given its intent as corporeal punishment and identification.[26] Though branding has not yet been extensively explored in black studies, Dr. Browne compelling traces how branding was a practice through which enslaved people were "signified as commodities to be bought, sold, and traded." Browne cites a late seventeenth century account John Barbot, a French slave merchant to give an example of its purposes,

> After every part of their naked bodies have been examined by a "surgeon", men, women, and children, those who have been marked as good (meaning fit to work as a slave), each one is "marked on the breast with a red hot iron, imprinting the mark of the French, English or Dutch companies, that so each nation may distinguish their own…In this particular, care is taken that the women, as tenderest, be not burnt too hard.[27]

This passage, as Browne goes on to assess, not only suggests that branding was a racializing act but also gendered act. This is vitally important in the history of tattooing

[26] Browne, Simone. Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness. Durham: Duke UP, 2015. Print.
[27] IBID

because the shift from body modification as a powerful, therapeutic, and transformative act is violently disjointed from tradition, specifically where skin and flesh were sites of profound feminine energy.

Not only was branding used to dehumanize enslaved peoples as they were forced into chattel slavery, but it also became a marker used to track those who resisted and revolted. Browne cites the 1655 decision, by the Barbados Council, to brand runaway slaves with the letter R on the forehead, "branding was a practice of punishment and accounting, and a preemptive strike at marking the already hypervisible body as identifiable outside of the plantation and other spaces of enslavement."[28] The black body was made legible as an object condemned to slavery, to any white viewer. Browne eloquently summarizes that "On those marked for death, branding sought to inscribe, a slow, premature death on black skin."[29] This inscription of social death on black flesh, what Hortense Spiller marks as the violent "theft of the body," is made ungrudgingly clear as we track how black bodies developed a dialectical, or conflicting relationship with physical manipulation, from spiritual and collective adornment to racialized terror. This, Spiller says, renders the captive body "a territory for cultural and political maneuver."[30]

Let us explore how we may shade in this conflict through notions of epidermalization and Browne's theory of dark sousveillance. Anthropologist Alfred Gell, in his prominent study of tattooing in Polynesia, Wrapping in Images (1993) postulates

[28] Browne, Simone. Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness. Durham: Duke UP, 2015. Print.
[29] IBID
[30] Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." Diacritics 17.2 (1987): 65. Web.

that skin represents a relational engagement between the individual and society, between the present and the past, and between the rulers and the ruled. Though speaking about communities practicing tattooing in Pacific Islands, this theoretical framing is what Fanon speaks to in his often-cited "Look a Negro" passage. Both Gell and Fanon are speaking to the experience of epidermalization. Though, for Fanon and others like Stuart Hall, epidermalization of black bodies is where the white gaze fixes him as an object among objects, "the white gaze, the only valid one, is already dissecting me". Epidermalization is the imposition of race on the body—it is a racial epidermal schema. There is no ontological resistance to this fact in spaces that are constructed to privilege whiteness. Fanon's experience made him crudely aware of the boundaries that are embedded onto his skin from the white gaze. In the interracial encounter, white people are able to participate in the schematization of the world while the black people may not since their skin closes down the possibility of free agency. In what ways can black epistemologies grounded in body adornment shift the effects of this paralyzing gaze? How does layering one's skin with art alter the possibility of freedom within "black" skin? How might we envision tattoos as continuing its tradition of warding off the watcher's evil eye?

Browne's deployment of dark sousveillance, which are "strategies used in the flight to freedom from slavery..." to identify moments of resistance and revolt despite the practice of branding offers vital insight into how we might go about investigating these important questions. She says, "Although branding was a practice of racializing surveillance that sought to deny black human life from being multiply experiences,

running away and numerous counter practices suggests that dehumanization was not fully achieved on an affective level, and that those branded were still ungovernable under the brand, or in spite of it…". Browne plots dark sousveillance as an imaginative place where freedom practices are enacted to respond, challenge, and confront an "all-encompassing" white supremacist framework. Orlando Patterson, who in his book *In Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, explains that slave branding "backfired" in Brazil, where the letter F that branded a recaptured runaway was "proudly displayed" to the more cautious but admiring fellow sufferers," marking its resignification as a mark of honor, not of capture. Both Browne and Patterson reveal the limits of the acts of dehumanization as "Countless black folks repurposed the brand mark for social networking and used the scars that remained from the violence done to their bodies as a means to reestablish kinship ties, or forge connections to shipmates with whom they shared the Middle Passage."[31]

For example, pledging a fraternity at a Historically Black College or University is considered a great honor within some black communities. Though simply pledging to one of these organizations is understood as a lifelong, binding pledge, some brotherhoods have used branding to build a connection to their enslaved forefathers. Fraternity branding, however, is a complex art form that is half material and half incorporeal, and is certainly wrought with issues. To analyze it, we must go beyond its physical form and understand the personal and organizational narrative histories that often accompany it. Branding swells thick with meaning, literally and physically embodying membership in

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the organization. While no national fraternity officially condones the practice of branding, it occurs on a regular basis. This modern practice is made problematic by the prevalence of fraternity hazing and the reenactment of slavery's violent epidermal manipulation.

In one case, after being beaten with a cane so hard that it broke, and between being pummeled, poked with needles and branded on his arms and chest with a red-hot iron, Wardell Pride reported that he had a numbing thought, "This is what slave masters did to slaves…And my only true reward was that I have an opportunity to be a slave master as many times as I want when it's all over."[32] This thought occurred when Price was being initiated in to the all-black Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity at Tennessee State University. As Price's black body and flesh experienced visceral violence's, his most immediate frame of reference was a jarring recollection to the genealogical trauma that is imagined to exist on and through the ruptured flesh. Without actually experiencing chattel slavery, Price embodied a visceral phantom experience of the plantation and is reckoning with what Saidiya Hartman's calls the "aftermath of slavery."

Saidiya Hartman's text, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007), interrogates the geographic and spiritual pathways where human strangers were remade fungible. Commenting on why slavery continues to persists in the everyday political lives of black America, Hartman suggests "that it is because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched over centuries. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited

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access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. I, too, am the afterlife of slavery."[33] Hartman narrates, analyzes, and reimagines the silences of the archive in order to trace those unnamed African ancestors who were remade and repurposed to endure incomprehensible terror, barbarous violence, and insidious neglect. In the books namesake chapter, Hartman identifies the range of methods slave owners and traders used to force African captives to "forget your kin, lose sight of your country, and cease to think of freedom" (p. 157). In addition to the physical torture that included guns, shackles, and whips, sorcery such as demonic herbs, baths, talismans, and incantations were used to rob slaves of spiritual protection, ownership of identity, and break and condition slaves into docile working bodies.

It is from this space of rupture that Hartman's transcending methodology reckons with the strangeness of statelessness in *Lose Your Mother,* while also suggesting that new regimes of personhood, modes of survival, and conceptions of collective freedom are generated by those same socially dead subjects. After being willingly branded, or tattooed as I suggest throughout this report, the body is transformed physically to enter a new psychic space. Narratives enter to bridge the gap and explain to others what the transformation represents. They embody personal histories and communal histories and are constructed and reconstructed to define what permanent body adornment means. So how might we read tattoos and body manipulation as performing, replicating, reinscribing, and revolting against black social death? The next section examines the

[33] Hartman, Saidiya V. Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008. Print.

tattoo work and personal narrative of artist-activist Karmenife with this question in mind.

Karmenife

Kill Your Local Rapist

Writer, activist, and artist Karmenife is a staunch advocate for black women in the struggle against sexual violence. Through Karmenife's artistic endeavors and blogging, I learned that she had been sexually assaulted by a male peer while attending a small, liberal arts college in New England. Against a vehement tide of ill-equipped campus administrators, customary slut-shaming from peers, and up against her perpetrator's generously giving alumnae parents, Karmenife's assaulter was expelled, a rarity amongst the litany of sexual assaulters who often get to remain on campuses. Karmenife has since rallied for black women's sexual violence; she founded the campus Survivor Support Network group that counsels and helps survivors of sexual assault and created visual and performance art projects. Karmenife was determined to "help survivors reclaim their bodies and spaces on campus." All the while, she was plagued with various streaks of severe depression, PTSD and anxiety induced vomiting. For Karmenife, the trauma she confronts daily is only a further testament to her personal strength, "I am stronger…I am more driven. I am more powerful."

One day, Karmenife was traveling on a New York City train when the familiar and intensifying feeling of anger and fear arose. She had become the object of a male stranger's unprovoked harassment. Gawking as he hurled a succession of kisses her way, Karmenife decided to reply. Making direct eye contact, she lifted the edge of her pant leg to reveal a tattoo on the inside of her right ankle, "KILL YOUR LOCAL RAPIST" in

bold, capitalized, black, American Typewriter lettering. Startled, the man's face blanched as he switched train cars. In a preliminary interview Karmenife commented on the endless love she had for her tattoo in that moment. She felt it had changed her life. Karmenife's admiration for her tattoos is palpable and profound. A black/queer/woman, a survivor of America's violent rape culture, weaponized her own flesh to upend, even just for the moment, the street harassment that women must endure as matter of daily life. She exclaimed that her transformation and markers of that transformation lie embedded in her tattoos.

Black diaspora and feminist theorist like Hortense Spillers and M. Jacqui Alexander, make clear the significance of black/queer/women's bodies, skin, and flesh. Spiller's canonical black feminist text, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987) begins with the centering of herself and thus all black women, she says "Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name."[34] Beginning with the Moynihan Report, Spillers traces back the tradition of "mis-naming" the African American woman. She suggests this mis-naming is seen in representations like the Jezebel, Mammy, Brown Sugar, or the castrating Welfare Queens in Moynihan's Report. This led to the "construction of a socio-political order, or human sequence, has meant for its African and indigenous peoples a scene of *actual mutilation, dismemberment, and exile* [emphasis added]."[35] What's fundamental to this article is Spillers discussion on the difference between "flesh" and "body", which for her also

[34] Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." Diacritics 17.2 (1987): 65. Web.
[35] IBID

marks the distinction between captive and liberated subject-positions, "Before the body, there is the flesh...If we think of the flesh as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship's hole, fallen, or 'escaped overboard.'"

Inspired by the work and lives of queer/black/women, especially those artists and beings outside of the academy, I find sustenance in Patricia Hill Collins's foundational text, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2nd Ed., 2000). The text aims to rearticulate and reclaim the unique forms of resistance and social thought developed to oppose oppression experienced by U.S. Black women. Patricia Hill Collins's major arguments are concerned with the ways in which U.S. Black women have had to contend historically, economically, and politically with the intersectional and simultaneous oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation. This intersectionality, a term coined by legal scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw, leads Black women in the U.S. to create their own standpoints and self-definitions. Collins's arguments, alongside those of Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, Cheryl Clarke, and bell hooks, assemble a rich genealogy of black feminist scholarship—drawing connective lines between theory and practice. Black Feminist Thought—as a theoretical frame—diverges from black women's standpoints. Collins drives her own theoretical framework alongside the work of a multitude of Black feminist intellectuals including scholars, artists, Black women and girls outside of "educated" spheres.

The first part of the book, "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought," explains the politics and distinguishing features of Black Feminist Thought as an introduction to the larger and more specific elements of Black Feminist Thought. In the

first chapter, “The Politics of Black Feminist Thought,” Hill Collins asserts that the standpoint of Black women at the intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and so forth stimulate a subjugated knowledge and defines Black Feminist Thought as a critical social theory. Critical social theory is comprised of bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that grapple with the central questions facing groups of people. Through her acknowledgment and analysis of the prior contributions of Black women ‘intellectuals’ that inspire self-definition and activism after years of being suppressed and excluded by the academy and society at large, the artistic and theoretical work done by Black women in the U.S. is thusly what becomes the critical social theory known as Black Feminist Thought. In the second chapter, “The Distinguishing Features of Black Feminist Thought,” Hill Collins reviews the six distinguishing features of Black Feminist Thought. These features are: the dialectical relationship of African American women’s oppression and activism; the diverse responses from Black women due to tensions between experience and ideas (including Black women of the Diaspora); the connections between experiences as heterogeneous group and the ensuing group knowledge; the essential contributions of African-American women intellectuals; the dynamism and ever-changing nature of Black feminism; and Black feminism’s relationship to other projects for social justice.

As I consider Karmenife’s elated win on the train, I am struck with questions about the utility of her tattoo. Can tattoos perform labor in defense of the body and human subjectivity within black social death? Further, what do we make of the historical ground from which we understand the assault on black flesh through sexual assault?

Karmenife's inked proclamation also symbolizes an active and permanent commitment to a spiritual and bodily rebirth; one where she can seek reprisal for injustices raged against the black female body. She states, "my transformation…[and] markers of that transformation lie embedded in my tattoos." What possibilities lie within the flesh to be able to threaten wretched retribution in defense of black women? So what can Black feminism reveal to us about Karmenife's and mines tattooed flesh? Well, I turn to Spillers again, who observed in the early 1980s that black women are like "the beached whales of the sexual universe." In other words, they're not speaking, but awaiting their verb. I suggest that one verb may be tattoo, defined as a mark (on a person or a part of the body) with an indelible design created by inserting pigment into punctures in the skin.

Conclusion

Healing and Reclamation: Loving the Flesh as Fleshly Performance

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Baby Suggs delivers a sermon exalting viciously the need for self-love, communal affirmation, and the spirituality of personhood. Baby Suggs offers these words to those black folks gathered at the clearing,

> Here, she said, in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it… No more do they love the skin on your back…You got to love it…This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved.[36]

This oration is a tribute to black flesh and its need for care in the face of physical subjugation. I continue to search for ways we might celebrate the skin through the

[36] Morrison, Toni. *Beloved: A Novel*. New York: Knopf, 1987. 108. Print.

manipulation of black bodies and ask how this process is related to and informs the project of black liberation through performance.

As stated by Soyica Colbert, "Historically aligned with hypervisibility, blackness places the individual on display. Cultural workers have used the transformative power of performance—repeated actions presented before an audience that carry with them the history of their recurrence—to shape viewers' and listeners' perceptions of blackness."[37] She goes on to say that "Performance works against notions that identity is fixed, and instead uses improvisation to instate and destabilize subjectivity". Tattoos are indeed one of the oldest forms of communication and expression being *repeated* across all parts of this world, so it is a practice that is ripe with performative tenants. The practice of tattooing becomes a way in which black people can develop and expose their internal beliefs. In other words, tattoos are a method towards self-reclamation, self-possession, and healing.

The painful process of drumming ink permanently into a person's skin is a cathartic process. According to artist Marlo Kaleo'okalani Lualemana, she has seen in her clients a revived sense of self as they work towards overcoming trauma.[38] As an artist who helps fellow survivors of sexual assault deal with and recover from their trauma, she believes staunchly that a unique and permanent tattoo can be healing. Based at Earthbound Tattoo in Monterey, California, she specializes in Polynesian and tribal body art and insists that her work with clients has been aided by their shared histories.

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[37] Colbert, Soyica. "Introduction: On Black Performance." African American Review 45.3 (2012): 275-76. Web.
[38] Luhar, Monica. "Native Hawaiian Artist Uses Tattoos to Teach Culture, Help Sexual Assault Survivors." NBCNews.com. NBCUniversal News Group, 03 Apr. 2017. Web.

Lualemana is a sexual assault survivor herself and says of her clients that they "share similar but different experiences, and we feel connected because of the trauma; shame; guilt and embarrassment we went through."[39] Many of her clients want a tattoo that represents reclaiming their lives; empowerment and reminding them that they we are no longer victims but we are survivors."[40]

Why should we remember these tragedies by marking them on the skin? Tattoos are not abiding by the same notions that render memories of trauma—traumatic in itself. the body making flesh these memories provides some sense of grounding, returning to self, in ways that mental pictures of events do not. They mark, for many, the healing process. In her chapter "Pedagogies of the Sacred" Alexander engages memory as a Sacred dimension of the self. She posits that Spiritual work is necessary and can serve as an antidote to oppression. Focusing specifically on African cosmology observed in Vodou and Santeria (both of which Alexander is a priestess), Alexander makes the case for understanding the Sacred as embodied in the flesh. The body serves as a communication tool between the spirit and the mind. The body becomes central to healing work, "given that the body praxis has been central in our mapping of subjectivity, it follows that it would be equally central in understanding the structure of healing as well."[41] Fleshy manipulation of the black body in the U.S. is historically linked to a gamut of white supremacist and colonial violence's, but. For those who do choose to

[39] Luhar, Monica. "Native Hawaiian Artist Uses Tattoos to Teach Culture, Help Sexual Assault Survivors." NBCNews.com. NBCUniversal News Group, 03 Apr. 2017. Web.
[40] IBID
[41] Alexander, Jacqui M. Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred. Durham: Duke UP, 2005. Print.

participate in tattoo culture, either as artist or canvas, they represent a desire-driven consciousness for artistry and creativity despite living in a world marked by survival and struggle.

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Literature Review

The brief set of texts I present in the following pages is an excerpt from a larger annotated bibliography that spans disciplinary areas that concern my larger dissertation work. The text and annotations offer a glimpse into the wide ranging and multidisciplinary works I must engage in order to effectively address my research questions. While all the sources I have listed here have offered me theoretical and methodological space to generate questions for examining tattoo culture within black studies, some have offered particularly poignant foundations. Thus, I work more closely with some over others.

Since my larger work intends to posit that a dialectical and performative relationship exists between black/queer/women bodies and tattoo culture, the fields I have developed are conceptual in that I've taken the liberty to combine transdisciplinary and multimedia subjects, both from within and outside of the academy. The three areas are 1) Visual Culture: Performance and Tattoos, 2) Feminisms, Black Women, and Sexuality: Radical Epistemology, and 3) Urban Studies, State Captivity, and Anti-Blackness. Though the third area is not directly addressed in this report, it does contribute to my larger research it gives insight to the densely populated black neighborhoods I intend to focus. Sources span traditional academic books and articles, film and television, as well as evidence retrieved from blogging and social media. Using these resources to map my intellectual design, I suggest that the bond between the process of obtaining permanent body art and the resulting reclamation of the body, allows for poor black/queer/women to center themselves in world bent on their demise.

Visual Culture: Performance and Tattoos

1. Bailey, Miya. "City of Ink's "Miya Bailey"" *City of Ink's "Miya Bailey"* N.p., n.d. Web. 17 May 2016.

Miya Bailey is a world-renowned tattoo and visual artist working out of Atlanta, GA. He currently owns two tattoo parlors, a private tattoo studio, an art gallery, and a clothing and merchandise store. Bailey's portfolio will be a critical part to my examination of black tattoo artists and business owners, black consumers (90% of clients of Black), and black aesthetic representation in his body art.

2. *Black Ink: Chicago*. Vh1. Chicago, IL, 1 Jan. 2016. Television.

This show follows a passionate and ambitious group of friends through Chicago as they band together to re-create their identities for their families and their business. The shop, 9 Mag, is a daily reminder of the struggles they work to overcome. Artist of interest are owner Ryan Henry, Van Jones, and Kat Tat.

3. Brooks, Daphne. *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*. Durham: Duke UP, 2006. Print.

This text argues that from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth, black transatlantic activists, actors, singers, and other entertainers frequently transformed the alienating conditions of social and political marginalization into modes of self-actualization through performance. In particular I will use Brooke's theory of "Afro-

alienation acts," to observe tattoos as performances encoded with both the traumas of self-fragmentation resulting from slavery and but also a counter-normative tactic to challenge identity making.

4. Caplan, Jane. *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2000. Print.

    This collection exposes, for the first time, the richness of the tattoo's European and American history from antiquity to the present day. In the process, it rescues tattoos from their stereotypical and sensationalized association with criminality. There is no engagement with blackness, race, gender, or sexuality.

5. Cesareo, Dan, prod. *Black Ink Crew*. VH1. New York, NY, 7 Jan. 2013. Television.

    Black Ink Crew is an American reality television series that documents the busy workers at a Harlem tattoo shop and all of the black celebrities they cater to. Artists of interest is Dutchess Lattimore.

6. Cochrane, Lauren. "Dark Art: The Rise of the Blackout Tattoo." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 29 Mar. 2016. Web.

    What began as a way of covering up a no-longer wanted tattoo is now being cited as a trend in its own right. Blackout tattoos are basically people are coloring in their tattoos with large, completely filled with black ink, geometric shapes. This trend is incredibly poignant as it plays on interesting dynamics of black skin as an affect of

tattooing that beg to question historical and contemporary politics about race and skin color.

7. *Color Outside the Lines*. Dir. Artemus Jenkins. Prod. Miya Bailey. Perf. Miya Bailey, Jacci Gresham, Zulu, Lady L. Dripping Star TV, May 2012. Web.

Color Outside the Lines is the first and only film that provides a deep look into the history, culture and lives of the world's top black tattoo artists. The film attempts to accurately tell the stories of these amazing artists from Atlanta to Amsterdam, but serves only as brief introduction to many artists whose experiences deserve a more critical consideration. The film also has over 50 hours of rich unedited interview footage.

8. DeMello, Margo. *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000. Print.

This book is an anthropological study of the modern sub-culture of tattoo fans. It briefly touches on the history of tattoos in western culture, with a focus on tattoos merging into popular/middle class culture from the 1980's onward. Race is disregarded and not considered in her analysis.

9. Gell, Alfred. *Wrapping in Images: Tattooing in Polynesia*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1993. Print.

Gell postulates that skin represents a relational engagement between the individual and society, between the present and the past, and between the rulers and the ruled. Through archival research, Gell presents a canonical text about Pacific Island communities practicing tattooing in the 20th and 21st century.

10. Gresham, Jacci. "Art Accent Tattoos New Orleans -." *Art Accent Tattoos New Orleans RSS*. N.p., n.d. Web.

Jacci Gresham is the one of two pioneering black women tattoo artists in the industry. Gresham moved to New Orleans from Detroit when she was 29 and opened the now oldest running tattoo shop in New Orleans, Art Accent. Gresham's biography has not been seriously engaged with in scholarly or popular text.

11. L, Lady. "Lady L Tattoos Presents "Body Art At Its Flyest"" *Lady L Tattoos Presents "Body Art At Its Flyest"* N.p., n.d. Web.

Lady L is an extremely talented self-taught tattoo artist from Detroit, MI. She self-promoted her tattoo business through various channels, most interestingly through tattooing dancers at local strip clubs. No extended or in-depth interviews have been published on her or her work.

12. Mifflin, Margot. *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo*. Vol.3. New York: PowerHouse, 2013. Print.

Mifflin examine tattooing in the Western world as it engages with feminist movements. It's the first book on tattooing that attempts to document and reveal a "hidden history" of women using the art form to resist and transform gendered and classed tropes of beauty and innocence. Mifflin does not include any critical engagement with race or blackness.

13. Zulu. "Zulu Tattoo :: Austin, TX." *Zulu Tattoo :: Austin, TX*. N.p., n.d. Web.

Zulu is one of the world's most renowned tattoo artists. He has been hailed as "the Godfather of spiritual tattooing" and he is respected for his philosophical and artistic approach to the art form. His philosophy is, ""We do not put tattoos on you; we bring tattoos out of you." Zulu also has his own Youtube show, "Zulu FYI," where he answers tattoo related questions and explores lifestyle interests such as food, music, fashion and more.

Feminisms, Black Women, and Sexuality: Radical Epistemology

1. Alexander, M. Jacqui. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*. Durham: Duke UP, 2005. Print.

This text is concerned with systems that perpetuate coloniality, the "hidden hegemonies" of state institutions that inscribe heterosexuality. In chapter 7, Alexander makes the case for understanding the Sacred as embodied in the flesh. The body serves as a communication tool between the spirit and the mind. The body becomes central to healing work.

2. Arias-Paulino, Karmenife. "Ife Speaks." Web log post. *Ifespeaks*. N.p., n.d. Web.

Karmenife Paulino-Arias, an activist and artist whose radical campaign to address her sexual assault has vehemently challenged rape culture through various mediums. Of particular interests are Karmenife's written narratives on her body art, her photo series "Reclamation," and her most recent essay, "Hand in Hand: How White Feminism Enables Rape Culture and Sexual Terrorism on Survivors of Color." I refer to Karmenife throughout this text with her first name as it is her personal and political choice to be called so.

3. Cohen, Cathy J. "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens." *A Critical Anthology Black Queer Studies* (2005): 21-51. Web.

Cohen looks at the failed features of queer political activism, as evolved from queer theory, and discusses how intersectionality is the key to not merely ushering in inclusive political activism, but forming collectives based on transformational agendas. In other words, for queer to really do the work, it must transform not just heteronormative

oppression, but systemic domination that overlaps sexuality, race, gender, and economic class.

4. Hull, Gloria T., Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith. *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*. Old Westbury, NY: Feminist, 1982. Print.

This text weaves personal narrative, literary criticism, and empirical analysis which cogently argues that Black Studies and Women's Studies in academia do not adequately address the multiple consciousness of Black women through discourses on racism, sexism, classism, and sexuality. The authors of the various articles articulate the need to look at Black women's lives as multi-faceted and complex, neither wholly positive or negative.

Urban Studies, State Captivity, and Anti-Blackness

1. Fleetwood, Nicole R. "Posing in Prison: Family Photographs, Emotional Labor, and Carceral Intimacy." *Public Culture* 27.3 77 (2015): 487-511. Web.

This essay considers how vernacular photography that takes place in prisons circulates as practices of intimacy and attachment between imprisoned people and their loved ones, by articulating the emotional labor performed to maintain these connections. Fleetwood focuses on her family's collection of portraits of incarcerated

relatives and, to a lesser extent, a 2012 exhibition of studio portraits of prisoners at Clocktower Gallery in New York City.

2. Gwaltney, John Langston. *Drylongso*. New York: Random House, 1980. Print. As a "vehicle for the transmission of their views"

Gwaltney acknowledges the immense power that comes from positioning black folks to speak for themselves in the academy. Gwaltney seeks to capture "core black culture" by recording and centering the oral histories of "ordinary" Black folk in early 1970s America. The book is a practice in what he terms "native anthropology," which considers the "perspectives, philosophies and systems of logic generated by populations which are usually expected to produce only unrefined data for the omniscient, powerful stranger to interpret" (xxx).

3. Kelley, Robin D. G. *Into the Fire--African Americans since 1970*. New York: Oxford UP, 1996. Print.

Kelley squarely confronts crucial issues of racism, including the backlash against affirmative action and the causes and effects of the Los Angeles riots. The style is readable, with telling detail about "how ordinary people make history," and the open design includes many black-and-white illustrations.

4. Kelley, Robin D. G. *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America*. Boston: Beacon, 1997. Print.

Kelley makes a strong critique to the way black urban culture or "ghetto-culture" has been essentialized and represented by academia and media. The obsession to find the "authentic black" has led to many scholars to homogenize and freeze a culture full of diversity and contradictions.

5. Patterson, Orlando, and Ethan Fosse. *The Cultural Matrix: Understanding Black Youth*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2015. Print.

This text brings together various essays from scholars who study black youths, presents Orlando Patterson's longstanding argument that culture as well as economic, legal, political, and residential structure plays a role in influencing the behavior of young black people.

6. Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1982. Print.

This text examines dozens of slave cultures across time and place in an effort to determine why this seemingly inhuman system of bondage was highly effective and nearly universal throughout history. His research led him to argue that slavery was an essential element in the growth of democracy and property rights,